

MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE FOR VICTIM
A S S I S T A N C E



VICTIM & WITNESS
ASSISTANCE BOARD

**A Statewide Needs
Assessment:
Considering Additional Needs
for Services for Victims of
Crime in the Commonwealth
of Massachusetts**

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July 1, 2003 begins the new three-year cycle for the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant awards. Congress established VOCA in 1984 with the intent to support victim compensation and victim assistance programs in meeting the needs of crime victims. This year, in preparation for the open bid for this grant, the Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance (MOVA) undertook a statewide needs assessment to take a critical look at service provision for victims of crime throughout the Commonwealth. As our mission states, MOVA exists to help crime victims. It is our hope that in undertaking this process, we will be better informed to make decisions regarding funding in FY 2004, and gain a greater understanding in general of victim service needs. Recognizing the large scope of this project and the many potential avenues for achieving the established goals, it was determined that the most efficient way to do this would be to hold regional focus groups.

Four focus groups were held in 2002 as follows:

- Nov. 8: Boston, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, 10am-12pm
- Nov. 14: Worcester, YWCA of Central MA, 2pm-4pm
- Nov. 22: Plymouth, Plymouth Public Library, 10 am-12 pm
- Dec. 11: Springfield, YWCA of Western MA, 1pm-3pm

Ten questions were prepared in advance to guide the discussion in these meetings. The questions were e-mailed to providers via the massvoca@yahoogroups.com listserv. (See appendix for complete list of questions).

The response to our invitations to participate in this process was notable and much appreciated. In total, 99 people attended the focus groups. We had representation from 51 VOCA-funded agencies, with 2 agencies submitting written input. These numbers indicate feedback was given by 73% of agencies currently funded. Because we also wanted to hear perspectives from those agencies providing victim services, but who were not funded under VOCA, we extended invitations to 55 other agencies representing varied populations. Of those 55, 27% attended (15 agencies). We also encouraged all VOCA and non-VOCA funded agencies to bring consumer representation with them to the meetings. In all, we heard from a total of six consumers representing domestic violence, GLBT, teen sexual assault, elder services, and disability issues. Lastly, we solicited feedback from state agencies that fund domestic violence and sexual assault programs. Out of these agencies, nine administrators offered input to the same questions asked at the focus groups. In total, 112 people contributed feedback to the assessment process. (See appendix for participant involvement).

All recorded input was then reviewed to determine additional areas of need. Based on the recurring issues and needs raised about underserved populations and gaps in services, the following four areas of need were identified:

Advocacy Services for Victims with Multiple Needs

Victim advocate positions within state or community-based agencies to serve victims of crime with multiple needs, including, but not limited to housing, legal services, medical care, translation services, and transportation.

Comprehensive Services to Child and Teen Victims

Direct service positions within state or community-based agencies to provide counseling and/or advocacy to children and/or teens who have been victimized. School-based services, treatment and support for victims of teen dating violence, assistance with housing, substance abuse, pregnancy, and other basic and special needs can be considered.

Services to Victims with Disabilities

Direct service positions within state or community-based agencies to provide counseling and/or advocacy to victims of crime who experience physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities.

Victims with Limited or No Access to Services

Direct service positions within state or community-based agencies to provide counseling and/or advocacy to victims of crime who have significant barriers to accessing services including, but not limited to elderly, homeless, male victims, victims of trafficking, and immigrants/refugees.

The following report details the significant issues and points of discussion that arose during the focus groups. In sum, it is clear that in difficult economic times, challenging decisions must be made to determine the most efficient and effective ways to maximize limited resources. In addition, it is important to consider the ways in which services can best be provided to serve the best interests of primary and secondary victims. There are no easy answers. However, through collaborative efforts and sharing ideas, conscientious decisions can be made to overcome the obstacles that confront us on a daily basis. We hope that through reading the thoughts and ideas presented here, further efforts can be made to strengthen the delivery of quality and comprehensive victim services.

What is working well in victim services now?

When focus groups were posed with the question, "What is working well in victim services?", a variety of responses were recorded. Specifically, people spoke about VOCA funding and how it is essential in providing victim services. Due to this type of funding, communities that are often marginalized are able to access services. Examples included home visits to the elderly, services to homeless victims, male victims of domestic violence and/or sexual assault, GLBT victims, services to rural communities, services to immigrants regardless of legal status, and response to school crises that have a long lasting impact. The fact that these services can be provided free of charge is an additional significant benefit. Restrictions imposed by insurance companies become a non-issue and service can be provided based on need as opposed to time limitations. Clients often feel their confidentiality is protected when they do not need to report the reason for services to an insurance company.

Out of every group asked this question, the majority mentioned that collaboration amongst agencies was a strength. A multi-disciplinary approach to serving clients is optimum since victim services have broadened to a variety of settings, from hospital-based services to community programs to the courthouse. This also allows for the professionalization of the field as more agencies recognize the need to serve crime victims. Through collaborative efforts, agencies are able to eliminate gaps in services, provide continuity between needed services, decrease duplication and improve coordination. Networking among agencies has helped ensure that victims get the services that they need.

Along with the above information, agencies pointed out specific programming that was working well within their communities. Three examples of this are:

- **Post conviction services:**
Efforts made by advocates providing these services have resulted in improved outreach to victims after conviction. This contact is needed in order to provide resources regardless of how long it has been since the crime occurred. Contact with victims, especially when abuse is continuing even after the offender has been incarcerated, has been able to occur. Perhaps most significantly, it was pointed out that victims have a voice at these stages of the process.
- **Advocacy:**
For the many advocates that work tirelessly to assist victims, strengths identified included the ability to help someone understand the process s/he will face, and to help her/him obtain needed information or resources by going with the client or calling on the victim's behalf as opposed to only providing a phone number to call. Along with this, the skills to provide

assistance in helping the victim identify and prioritize needs such as financial concerns, shelter, and transportation were highlighted. SAFEPLAN advocates were mentioned as valuable service providers in the court system. Overall, the strength of advocacy for victims was summed up by one person who said, "Advocates working with victims provide a sense of balance to the process".

- Outreach in schools:
Although recent funding cuts have impacted services in schools, it was pointed out that access to serving children seems to have improved over time, especially when serving children impacted by domestic violence. Children who witness violence are able to receive critical services. Efforts to have groups in schools and work with school counselors have increased. Teen survivor support groups allow staff to be more creative than work done in one-on-one sessions.

What are the current gaps in services?

When discussing the successes in victim services, it was frequently noted by providers that much of what was working would not be able to occur without VOCA funding. This was because VOCA allows victims to receive free services. It does not discriminate against age, race, sexual orientation, religion, or ability. There are no geographic boundaries to limit a provider from offering services to a victim outside the agency's "catchment" area. It also allows for coverage of some administrative costs, such as cell phones, to assist providers in making resources immediately accessible to victims. Despite these benefits, gaps in services do still exist, and would be significantly larger without this funding.

What became very clear was that gaps identified by those participating in the focus groups fell under some broad categories that are defined as the following additional areas of need:

- Advocacy Services for Victims with Multiple Needs
- Comprehensive Services to Child and Teen Victims
- Services to Victims with Disabilities
- Victims with Limited or no access to services

Advocacy Services for Victims with Multiple Needs

When there are limited resources available, it can be particularly challenging to access needed services. Victims who have complex needs and need assistance in navigating through multiple systems in order to get needs met are particularly vulnerable. The need to have an advocate becomes crucial for crime victims who are dealing with the trauma of being victimized, and negotiating the court system and other bureaucracies. When issues exist such as the need for

translation services, transportation, legal assistance, housing, or medical care, the relevancy for an advocate increases dramatically.

Comprehensive Services to Child and Teen Victims

Repeatedly, the need to enhance services to children and teens who have been victimized was discussed. A variety of issues were mentioned that ranged from providing general services to children to the need to expand the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program in order to improve forensic evidence collection for child victims of sexual assault. Other pertinent areas brought up included:

- Child abuse services
- Child witness to violence services
- Child Advocacy Centers
- Non-medical sexual abuse evaluations
- School-based victim services
- Services for children who reside with a perpetrator or have a parent who does not support their treatment
- Services for GLBT youth
- Services for teens who have experienced dating violence
- Sexual abuse services, particularly for children under 12
- Sexual Abuse Intervention Network (SAIN)
- Specialized trauma/mental health services for severely abused children
- Translation services, and housing options for teens that are not pregnant or substance abusing.

Services to Victims with Disabilities

Services for victims with disabilities arose in the majority of the focus groups. It was pointed out that this population is particularly vulnerable to victimization. Issues discussed included a lack of services in general and a lack of training for victim service providers intervening with this population. A suggestion was made to use the Sexual Abuse Intervention Network (SAIN) model to serve this population. Other gaps mentioned included the need for emergency respite for disabled victims, lack of available guardians for disabled victims, services for cognitively disabled victims, those with communication challenges, and the deaf community, including sign language interpretation.

Victims with Limited or No Access to Services

This last area of need was designed around the victim populations that have little or no access to services. These populations were identified as follows:

- Male victims: clergy abuse victims, gay men, straight male victims of domestic violence, shelters for male victims.
- Immigrant/refugee population: including undocumented victims.
- Elder victims: caretaker abuse, financial exploitation
- Victims of trafficking

- Homeless victims

These additional areas of need were the direct result of a synthesis of focus group feedback. When asked about populations that were underserved, the most frequent responses included the elderly, immigrants/refugees, teens, homeless, disabled, and those with complex issues, including substance abuse. The additional areas of need capture these populations since they were clearly identified as among the most vulnerable. While the four areas outlined above were the most prominent issues, other gaps in services were also identified. *VOCA guidelines limit the ability to address some issues raised or they are beyond the scope of VOCA to resolve the problems.* Nevertheless, because such needs were defined in the focus groups, they are addressed here as well.

An overwhelming majority of people addressed the lack of funding available to provide quality services. Without adequate funding, inadequate staffing exists. Due to the lack of resources, salaries may be low, the ability to hire experienced staff becomes more difficult, and needed positions may remain vacant since funding sources to cover salaries may have dried up. This results in waiting lists, high caseloads, and eventual staff burnout. Since programs have become quite proficient in outreach, the number of clients increases, however the ability to provide quality and consistent services is impacted by the decreased staffing.

The need for training and education for staff, for other disciplines who serve the same clients (eg. police, judges), and for the general public was another area that was discussed as a gap in providing quality services to victims and survivors. Such opportunities are influenced by fiscal constraints, and are often the first area to be cut when budgets must be pared down. The federal guidelines for VOCA do not allow for prevention and education activities, however, they do support training for service providers. Some particular areas mentioned included the need for training for service providers to develop specialized skills in trauma and victimization, the need to train clinicians on conducting forensic sexual abuse evaluations since there is not enough access to them, and the need for training on up and coming issues, such as bioterrorism.

While it was pointed out that much progress has been made over the last couple of decades in victim rights, more work needs to be done to support victims of crime. Entering into the criminal justice system can be an overwhelming and intimidating process. On top of that, cases may take years to resolve, and the victim's expectations for justice through the court system can be significantly challenged. Just appearing in court disrupts daily routines such as going to work, and the issue of lost wages and the ability to remain gainfully employed arises. Victim compensation does allow for some relief, but the turnover time to receive compensation can be long for a victim with financial struggles. Similarly, post-conviction, victim notification can be inconsistent depending upon the

county one lives in since not all sheriffs' offices provide this service in the same manner. Other challenges include locating victims when they have moved and service provision to victims when there has been no arrest.

When thinking about the cost of a crime to a victim, what services do you believe should absolutely be offered to victims and/or their families for free?

The cost of crime to a victim is not just an emotional one, but a financial one as well. As victims attempt to overcome their victimization, they are often faced with medical expenses, legal fees, childcare needs, transportation issues, and lost wages due to missed work. Focus group participants identified the following areas as the most necessary services to offer clients free of charge, listed in the order in which they were most frequently raised:

- Mental health services: counseling and groups
- Legal services: criminal and civil/probate court
- Emergency housing that meets the needs of the victim: hotels, shelter, transitional living programs, moving and storage costs, relocation costs.
- Advocacy services
- Childcare
- Medical and health services
- Transportation to and from services

A common theme that arose was that victims and survivors should have the ability to obtain mental health counseling at no cost, without having to access their insurance. In doing so, confidentiality and anonymity are maintained, which are important for a victim who may experience humiliation and shame. Several providers expressed that any expenses incurred by a victim as a result of the crime committed against them should be covered. By addressing the costs described above, the cost to society will be less in the long run.

Knowing that funding may be cut by as much as 15% next year, what recommendations would you make to prioritize funding options?

In difficult fiscal times, creativity and strategy are crucial when it comes to stretching resources. Many thoughts and ideas were generated from this question. Most frequently noted was the issue of maintaining quality staff and whether salaries should stay the same or be increased. An increase in salaries may require a cut in hours, a difficult balance to strike. When managing budget restrictions, programs may choose to cut salaries, but they are not always reestablished when fiscal times begin to thrive again. An increase in salaries can also be more cost-effective than advertising, rehiring, and training. Another perspective presented was that to maintain part-time staff is difficult since

turnover increases, and it is also expensive to manage fringe costs. Larger agencies also must be attentive to equity in salary. If salary levels decrease from one funding source, they must find a way to fund the gap now created in order to offer competitive and fair salaries to all employees.

Other strategies to address the potential for decreased funding were discussed. If cuts were to be made across the board, programs would need to focus attention on sustaining core services. Expansion may not be fiscally responsible during such times as it inevitably leads to staff burnout. Suggestions were made to fund programs that are known to work and have a reputation of quality service as opposed to considering services that may be new and more risky. Some opinions suggested that established programs tend to bounce back better than start-up endeavors. It was also pointed out that when budget cuts happen, funders must recognize that service delivery will decrease and that fewer services are being bought. Further discussion indicated that there was a need to target capacity building. Consideration of what services are available in a community must happen. Collaborating in service delivery in an area must be maximized. One suggestion was to fund a position for a coordinator of a multi-disciplinary or interagency team.

Suggestions for managing administrative funds were also made. One thought was that administrative support to run a VOCA program is crucial. There are critical expenses in administering services, which must be included in budgeting. Others asserted that direct services must be maintained, and that may mean cutting supplies and technology and looking to in-kind donors for these services. One suggestion made was to not fund positions that are administrative in nature or decrease training opportunities at the statewide level. *Such ideas were summed up by one person who said that policies about where budget cuts occur should come from the program rather than the funder because what works for one program may not work for another.*

If you could sit with the Governor today and tell him three things to improve in victim services, what would they be?

Ideas and suggestions to share with the Governor were many, and certainly not limited to three specific messages. Below are the most common responses and some additional thoughtful comments.

Homelessness was not brought up in the November campaign. Housing is an issue that must be directly addressed.

Take time to listen to victims. Go meet providers in the community to see and hear about their daily work and its value. Consider bringing people with specialized experience together to be informed by them about the work they do.

We need to make improvements in the legal and criminal justice system to establish a more humane and effective process. Prosecutors could benefit from working with victims' strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses. How can we work with judges to help them assure victim safety?

Work closely with the legislature on victim issues.

Read the Governors Task Force on Sexual Assault and Abuse Report and consider how best to address the issues that are outlined.

Victim issues affect all of us. Cutting from the bottom is not the best answer. This will lead to the snowball effect. Services are already under-funded. How can we create mechanisms to increase funding over the long-term?

Conclusion

MOVA would like to thank all those who offered their time and input to this process. From the experiences and expertise of service providers, consumers of services, and state funders, we identified four additional areas of need that we hope agencies will consider as they set priorities for service provision in the upcoming year. Despite dismal fiscal times, it is inspiring to recognize the commitment of so many to victims and their families. The resourceful and strategic ideas presented during the focus groups will assist MOVA in making informed decisions to ensure that VOCA funds encompass the most relevant and needed services. We look forward to convening other such forums in the future and working together on behalf of victims of crime.

Addendum

Focus Group Questions

VOCA Providers and Non-VOCA Providers

1. Please introduce yourself, the agency you work for, and the type of victim services you currently provide.
2. A. What is working well in victim services now?
B. In your experience, what have been the successes in your program/agency?
3. What are the current gaps in services?
4. Which victim populations would you identify as most "underserved"?
5. When thinking about the cost of a crime to a victim, what services do you believe should absolutely be offered to victims and/or their families for free?
6. A. What efforts are made within your agency/community to reach out to victims and publicize your services?
B. What do you think could be done to improve upon outreach efforts?
7. A. What are the barriers that victims encounter when trying to access services?
B. What can be done to decrease these barriers?
8. A. If VOCA funding was cut, what impact would that have on the delivery of victim services?
B. Knowing that funding may be cut by as much as 15% next year, what recommendations would you make to determine how to prioritize funding options? (For example, is it most important to maintain salaries, but decrease hours; increase types of service available, but decrease positions to provide the service?)
9. What three areas would you consider as priorities for funding?
10. A. For those of you with VOCA funding, in what ways have you found the technical assistance provided by MOVA to be useful? (For example, site visits, VOCA Guidelines Training).
B. What other services would you like to see MOVA provide?
C. In what ways do you envision your agency and MOVA working together?
11. If you could sit with the Governor today and tell her three things to improve in victim services, what would they be?

Focus Group Questions

Consumers:

1. Please introduce yourself. Say a word about why you are interested in participating today, and how, if at all, you are familiar with MOVA and the work we do.
2. When thinking back on your experience, what types of services did you access to help you recover from your victimization?
3. How did you find out about the types of services and/or resources available to you?
4. What services did you find to be most helpful to manage the impact of the crime that you experienced?
5. Where do you see the gaps in services? What did you need that wasn't available?
6. Were your individual needs met? For example, if you required a translator, handicapped accessibility, an accessible geographic location or transportation to receive services, cultural considerations, etc., were the service providers you worked with able to meet your need?
7. What types of services do you feel need to be funded to provide support to victims?
8. What services do you believe should absolutely be offered to victims and/or their families for free?
9. What advice can you give to help us make decisions around funding for agencies who provide services to victims of crime?
10. If you could sit with the Governor today and tell her 3 things to improve in victim services, what would they be?

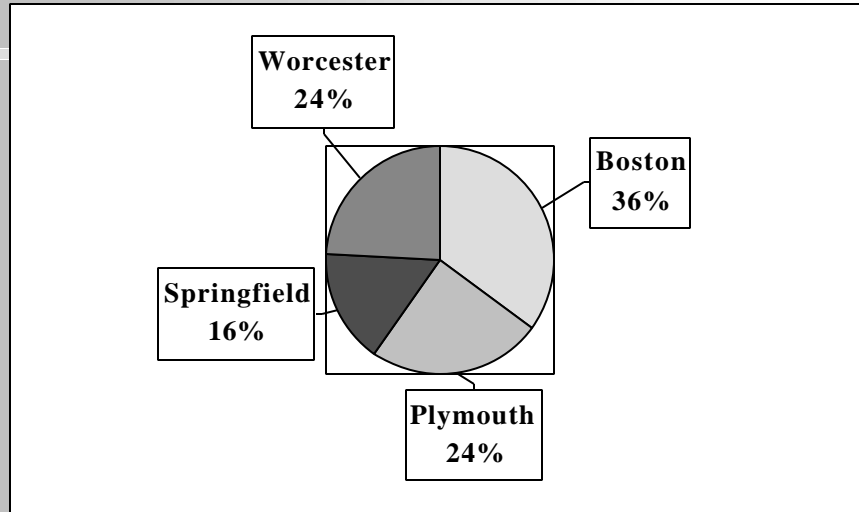
Focus Group Questions

State Funders

1. A. What is working well in victim services now?
B. In your experience, what have been the successes with the programs that you fund?
2. What are the current gaps in services?
3. Which victim populations would you identify as most “underserved”?
4. When thinking about the cost of a crime to a victim, what services do you believe should absolutely be offered to victims and/or their families for free?
5. What do you think could be done to improve upon outreach efforts?
6. A. What are the barriers that victims encounter when trying to access services?
B. What can be done to decrease these barriers?
7. A. If VOCA funding was cut, what impact would that have on the delivery of victim services?
B. Knowing that funding may be cut by as much as 15% next year, what recommendations would you make to determine how to prioritize funding options? (For example, is it most important to maintain salaries, but decrease hours; increase types of service available, but decrease positions to provide the service?)
8. What three areas would you consider as priorities for funding?
9. What other services would you like to see MOVA provide?
10. In what ways do you envision your agency and MOVA working together?
11. If you could sit with the Governor today and tell her three things to improve in victim services, what would they be?

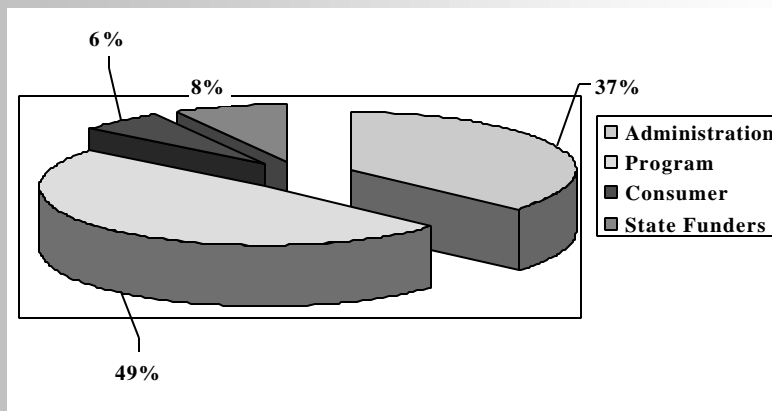
Participant Involvement

% in Attendance by Location



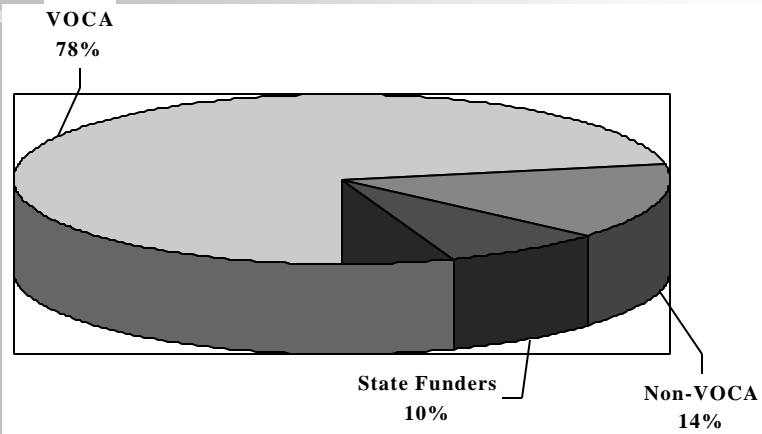
Indicates percentage of people who attended focus groups by location. Total participation=99

Participant Representation



Indicates percentages of people who gave feedback in focus groups, in writing, or other settings. Total participants = 112.

VOCA vs. Non-VOCA Representation



Indicates feedback given based upon current funding relationships to VOCA.
Total participants=112